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Harold Brown, Defense Secretary in Carter Administration, Dies at 91

By Robert D. McFadden

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Harold Brown, a brilliant scientist who helped develop America's nuclear arsenal and negotiate its first strategic arms control treaty, and who was President Jimmy Carter's secretary of defense in an era of rising Soviet challenges, died on Friday at his home in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif. He was 91.

His daughter Deborah Brown said the cause was pancreatic cancer.

As defense secretary from 1977 to 1981, Mr. Brown presided over the most formidable power in history: legions of intercontinental ballistic missiles and fleets of world-ranging bombers and nuclear submarines, with enough warheads to wipe out Soviet society many times over. But that was hardly the question.

In an age that imperiled humanity with nuclear Armageddon, the issue was whether America could keep pace with Soviet strategic capabilities, maintaining the balance of terror — an assurance of mutual destruction, with hundreds of millions killed outright — that had dominated the nuclear arms race and strategic planning throughout the postwar era.

In those days, “Dr. Strangelove,” Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 black comedy film about the doctrine of mutually assured destruction, shaded debates over nuclear strategy because the concept of deterrence was based on the dubious assumption that if the Russians launched a surprise nuclear attack, America could survive and retaliate, devastating Soviet cities and strategic targets, although millions would die.

“I believe that in the age of mutual deterrence — and we are still in the age of mutual deterrence — the superpowers will behave the way hedgehogs make love,” Mr. Brown said a few months after taking office. “That is, carefully.”



Mr. Brown in his office in 1979 holding models of Soviet and United States missiles.
Teresa Zabala/The New York Times

In retrospect, experts say, the Carter administration and Mr. Brown maintained the strategic balance, countering Soviet aircraft and ballistic innovations by improving land-based ICBMs, by upgrading B-52 strategic bombers with low-flying cruise missiles and by deploying far more submarine-launched missiles tipped with MIRVs, or multiple warheads that split into independent trajectories to hit many targets.

In his cavernous Pentagon office, behind a nine-foot desk once used by Gen. John J. Pershing, Mr. Brown, a soft-spoken and intensely private man, often worked alone, absorbed in his documents, books and judgments. He seemed uncomfortable at briefings and hearings. But colleagues called him a forceful political infighter who protected his turf and impressed hawks and doves alike with his command of facts.

By the time he joined the Carter administration, Mr. Brown had played important roles in the defense establishment for two decades — in nuclear weapons research, in development of Polaris missiles, in directing the Pentagon's multibillion-dollar weapons research program, and in helping to plot strategy for the Vietnam War as secretary of the Air Force.

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, right, swearing in Mr. Brown, second from right, as secretary of the Air Force in 1965. Henry Burroughs/Associated Press

He had been a protégé of Edward Teller, father of the hydrogen bomb, and his successor as head of the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory in California. He had worked for Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon; and had been a delegate to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I).

He also had been president of the California Institute of Technology, where he was instrumental in admitting the first women undergraduates. In 1970, the trustees voted to admit women pending construction of new dormitories, which might have taken two years. Not wanting to wait, Mr. Brown arranged to set aside rooms for women in existing dormitories, and Caltech began admitting women that fall.

As the first scientist to become defense secretary, Mr. Brown knew the technological complexities of modern warfare. He began the development of “stealth” aircraft, with low profiles on radar. He accelerated the Trident submarine program and the conversion of older Poseidon subs to carry MIRVs. And, with an eye on cost-effectiveness, he and President Carter halted the B-1 bomber as a successor to the B-52.

It was all very expensive. Despite Mr. Carter’s campaign promises to cut military spending, Pentagon budgets under Mr. Brown rose to \$175 billion in the 1981 fiscal year, from \$116 billion in the 1978 fiscal year, reflecting the need to modernize strategic arms and strengthen conventional forces to meet challenges in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Mr. Brown laid the groundwork for talks that produced the Camp David accords, mediated by Mr. Carter and signed in 1978 by President Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel. The accords led to an Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty in 1979.

In 1980, Mr. Brown helped plan a mission to rescue American hostages held by Iranians who seized the American Embassy in Tehran in November 1979. It failed: Eight American servicemen were killed in the operation, and the hostages were not freed until President Ronald Reagan took office in January 1981.

Concerned that America's allies were not sharing enough of the defense burden, Mr. Brown repeatedly urged the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and Japan and South Korea, to increase military spending, but with limited success. He had sharp valedictory words for the allies: "They need to behave as if their military security is as important to them as it is to us."

Harold Brown was born in New York City on Sept. 19, 1927, the only son of Abraham Brown, a lawyer, and Gertrude Cohen Brown. From childhood he was considered a genius. At 15, he graduated from the Bronx High School of Science with a 99.52 average. At Columbia University, he studied physics and earned three degrees — a bachelor's in only two years, graduating in 1945 with highest honors; a master's in 1946; and a doctorate in 1949, when he was 21.

He married Colene D. McDowell in the early 1950s. She died last year.

In addition to his daughter Deborah, he is survived by another daughter, Ellen Brown; a sister, Leila Brennet; and two grandchildren.

After several years of teaching and research, Mr. Brown was recruited by the Atomic Energy Commission in 1952 to work at the Livermore laboratory, where nuclear weapons were being designed.

From 1961 to 1965, he was director of defense research and engineering, the Pentagon's third-ranking civilian, responsible for weapons development, and one of Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara's "whiz kids." He was the Air Force secretary from 1965 to 1969, and over the next eight years he was president of the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena.

After leaving the Pentagon in 1981, Mr. Brown taught at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University for several years, and from 1984 to 1992 he was chairman of the school's foreign policy institute.

Since 1990, he had been a partner at Warburg Pincus, the New York investment firm. He served on the boards of many companies, including Altria, CBS, IBM, Mattel and Rand.

Mr. Brown, who had helped negotiate the SALT I arms control pact signed in 1972 by Mr. Nixon and Leonid I. Brezhnev, the leader of the Soviet Union, also took part in talks that led to SALT II, a comprehensive pact signed by Mr. Carter and Mr. Brezhnev in June 1979. The accord was

intended to sharply limit missiles and warheads, and Mr. Brown considered it a cornerstone of national security and détente with the Soviet Union.

It needed only Senate ratification. Mr. Brown, its chief administration advocate, said the treaty would cut military costs and the risks of nuclear war. But critics called it unverifiable and argued that the Russians could not be trusted. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 killed the treaty's chances, and Mr. Carter withdrew it from consideration. (Washington and Moscow nonetheless honored the pact's terms until 1986, when Mr. Reagan accused the Russians of violations and withdrew from it.)

Mr. Brown called the treaty episode his deepest regret in office. But in an interview with The New York Times, he spoke of one satisfying outcome. "I guess I'm proudest of the fact that we have remained at peace these four years," he said. Mr. Carter awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

Sarah Mervosh contributed reporting.

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